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Reagan belittles controversy over Nicaraguan port mining

By Robert Timberg
Sun Staff Correspondent

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — President Reagan has described the dispute over the U.S.-assisted mining of Nicaraguan harbors as "much ado about nothing," and defended the American involvement by saying the explosive devices were "homemade mines that couldn't sink a ship."

In remarks made Monday and released yesterday by the White House, Mr. Reagan said the mines were laid to interdict a "flood" of military supplies that were being unloaded at the ports and later conveyed to leftist insurgents opposing the government of El Salvador, which the U.S. is backing.

"And those were homemade mines... that couldn't sink a ship," he said. "They were planted in those harbors... by the Nicaraguan rebels. And I think that there was much ado about nothing."

Mr. Reagan said a Bulgarian ship was now in a Nicaraguan port, which he did not identify, unloading tanks and armored personnel carriers.

"This is the fifth such Bulgarian ship in the last 18 months," he said. "Just a week or two ago, there were Soviet ships in there unloading war materiel."

The president's comments came in an interview conducted Monday by Brian Farrell, of Irish television, in anticipation of Mr. Reagan's 10-day European trip, which begins Friday and includes Ireland.

A transcript of the interview was released to reporters traveling with Mr. Reagan yesterday to Colorado Springs, where he is to deliver the commencement address at the U.S. Air Force Academy today.

The president toured portions of the U.S. Olympic Training Center here shortly after his arrival. The 34-acre facility, run by the U.S. Olympic Committee, formerly was the headquarters of the North American Air Defense Command.

Mr. Reagan tested his strength on a bench press machine and

watched Olympic boxers and the women's basketball team practice. In brief remarks during his tour, he attempted to soften the impact of the Soviet boycott on this year's Los Angeles games.

"I hope you realize," he told the athletes, "that the success of the Olympics, and your personal success in the Games, in no way depends on political machinations of power brokers in countries that are less than free. The Games are moving forward and will be successful."

Earlier, during the interview with Irish television, Mr. Reagan said he believed the boycott was either in retaliation for the U.S. refusal to participate in the Moscow Games in 1980 after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, or to protect against a wave of defections by top Soviet athletes.

"I think they don't want to be embarrassed by having revered athletes in their country come to this country and decide to stay," he said.

Asked about planned demonstrations in Ireland against his Central American policies, Mr. Reagan said the protesters were "misinformed." He said many of those planning to demonstrate, though sincere and well-intentioned, had been influenced by the "vast, worldwide disinformation machineries" of the Soviet Union and Cuba.

"All I can suggest to some of these people who are saying this in Europe, and who have evidently been propagandized, is — and I don't mean to sound presumptuous — but is there any one of them that has access to all the information that the president of the U.S. has?" he said.

Mr. Reagan has used the expres-

sion "much ado about nothing" in the past to try to deflect criticism, applying it last year to the controversy surrounding the receipt of 1980 Carter campaign debate briefing papers by his campaign committee.

Although covert U.S. assistance to the Nicaraguan guerrillas, or "freedom fighters," as Mr. Reagan often calls them, has been well known for months, the aid in mining the harbors provided to them by the Central Intelligence Agency generated sharp, sustained congressional criticism when it became known.

That criticism took concrete form last week when the Democratic-majority House refused by a wide margin to approve additional funding for the so-called "contras" during the current fiscal year.

The harbor mining also was condemned by the World Court as a violation of international law, although the U.S. informed the court before its decision that Washington would not recognize its jurisdiction in the matter.

In the interview, Mr. Reagan concluded that U.S.-Soviet relations were "dead," but when asked if they were very dead, he replied, "not all that bad." He laid the deterioration in relations to Soviet unhappiness with the U.S. military buildup.

"They're unhappy because they see we're preparing to defend ourselves if need be," he said. "Sure, they're unhappy because they liked it the other way when under a kind of detente, they were having things their own way. Now they know we're not going to make ourselves vulnerable, as was done before."

Near the end of the interview, Mr. Reagan was asked how he would like history to remember him. "I guess, if they just said I did my best, I might be pleased."